Natural OUTLOOK
PD-020/13-12 DECEMBER 2013/JANUARY 2014

CONSUMER CONFIDENCE REPORTS: WHAT'S IN YOUR DRINKING WATER?

Check your mailbox—or in-box

Every summer, water rate payers get some additional information from their drinking-water supplier. Sometimes it's a document included in their bill, sometimes it's a separate mailing entirely, featuring charts, definitions, and even conservation tips. Starting this year, it could be an e-mail message or a direct link to information on the supplier's website. This is your annual Consumer Confidence Report.

The EPA requires that every community drinking-water system (which is a public water system that has the potential to supply drinking water year-round to at least 15 connections or 25 residents) provide an annual CCR to their customers. These reports are due on July 1 and are based on data from the previous calendar year.

Until recently, these reports could only be provided by mail; now, online reporting satisfies the requirement as long as customers are provided a link that takes them directly to the CCR.

Your Consumer Confidence Report

The CCR summarizes information that your water system already collects to comply with federal and state drinking-water-quality regulations. This information includes all of the following:

- source(s) of water used (i.e., rivers, lakes, reservoirs, or aquifers)
- chemical and bacteriological contaminants found in the water
- explanation about contaminants that may be found in the water
- populations that may be vulnerable to contaminants found in the water
- compliance with drinking water rules (violations)
- educational health information
- contact information for the water system
- opportunities for public participation

New Tool Helps Community Water Systems Comply

To assist systems with required filings, the TCEQ developed an online CCR-generator tool that populates a CCR template with the most up-to-date TCEQ data. The system must add some data specific to it, but it can then publish and distribute the CCR to customers. Since the CCR generator went online last year, filing rates have increased by 30 percent.

What Does the CCR Mean to Me?

Okay, you got the message. But what does it mean, exactly?

Each report will have a list of definitions of acronyms and terms listed in the report, as well as a table of contaminants that were detected in the drinking water. The information contained in the table of contaminants will help you understand whether or not the system is in compliance with the primary drinking-water standards and the relative risk that is posed.

The highest level of some contaminants allowed by EPA standards is called the Maximum Contaminant Level. The MCL is a very conservative level below which we would not expect any substantial risk to health. The table will list the MCL for each substance sampled, the actual readings in a system's water, the targets or goals regarding levels, and possible

sources of contamination. The EPA keeps a list of potential contaminants that are regulated at the state level.

Public water supplies can have detectable levels of contaminants and the water source may still meet the National Primary Drinking Water Standards. It is important for people to review the definitions and readings carefully. People with health concerns should check with their health-care professionals.

Common Consumer Questions

Violations

The public water system's CCR lists all their drinking-water violations for each year. That way, you can see exactly what violations, if any, occurred in the twelve months since the previous report and what steps the water system has taken to resolve the violations.

Naturally Occurring Constituents

Arsenic, fluoride, and other metals and minerals occur naturally in rock formations in some parts of Texas and can consequently show up in drinking water. These materials do not pose a serious concern to the health of anyone who drinks the water, however, even at the highest levels found naturally in groundwater in Texas. Because of natural fluctuations, systems that have higher levels of these constituents are required to increase monitoring. In such cases, samples are taken quarterly and, using a running annual average, operators and regulators can determine whether or not a high reading indicates a long-term problem that needs correction.

Heavy Metals

Lead and other heavy metals can come from old pipes. The solution to high levels of these metals can often be to replace the infrastructure or household plumbing. If necessary, public water systems can adjust for corrosive water by adding chemicals during treatment.

Color, Odor, and Taste Differences

High levels of manganese or iron, organic materials, old plumbing, or even an old water heater, can result in colored water. Certain algae or hydrogen sulfide from natural bacterial action can cause unpleasant odors. Taste can be affected by a number of things, including the type of disinfectant used at the water-treatment plant, organic material, or total dissolved solids. While some of these side effects can be unpleasant, they do not necessarily mean the water is unsafe to drink.

There are methods public water systems can use to correct or minimize concerns, including blending, chemical sequestration or settling, filtration, or reverse osmosis ion exchange. The exact methods will vary, depending on the nature of the specific problem.

Disinfection By-Products

The addition of disinfectant to water to kill potentially dangerous pathogens can result in the formation of disinfection by-products such as trihalomethane (THM) and haloacetic acids (HAA). These chemicals form when the disinfectant reacts with naturally occurring organic matter in the water. THM and HAA do not pose an immediate risk to the health of anyone who drinks the water.

Boil-Water Notices

If a breach in the system occurs, such as a line break or inadequate disinfection, the system will issue a boil-water notice to alert customers. While these notices are often precautionary, customers should take them seriously to decrease the risk of water-borne illness.

My Dog Ate My CCR!

You were on vacation and the house sitter tossed your copy of the CCR? That's okay—you can request another copy from your water provider, or you can retrieve a copy yourself, if the system posted it online. You can also get information in real time about your drinking water by consulting the Texas Drinking Water Watch database. You can find the water systems that TCEQ regulates as well as up-to-date sample results and compliance information.

The TCEQ continues to work with public drinking-water providers and consumers alike to provide more useful information needed to keep Texas taps flowing.

On the Web

EPA list of potential contaminants
water.epa.gov/drink/contaminants/index.cfm#List

Texas Drinking Water Watch database
dww.tceq.state.tx.us/DWW/

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